Taking Action: What We Can Do to Address the Civic Achievement Gap

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We face a **civic achievement gap** in the United States that is as troubling as the academic achievement gaps in math and reading to which we have rightly devoted significant attention and resources over the past decade. This civic achievement gap is both broad and deep. It shows up in virtually every measure we have of civic and political participation, knowledge, skills, and attitudes. It tracks income, race/ethnicity, and even naturalization status. It is more pronounced in the United States than in any other country in which we have good measures. And despite our public schools' historic and unique founding for civic purposes, American teachers and schools are not being given the tools to address the civic achievement gap—if anything, we are being pulled away from effective action and best practices that could help close the civic achievement gap. Nonetheless, there are some things we can do as social studies teachers and advocates; first, however, it is important to arm ourselves with some principles and facts.

To begin with, any analysis of the civic achievement gap needs to be grounded in a clear conception of citizenship. For this purpose, I adopt *The Civic Mission of Schools'*[1] description of "competent and responsible citizens" as those who:

> 1. are informed and thoughtful; have a grasp and an appreciation of history and the fundamental processes of American democracy; have an understanding and awareness of public and community issues; and have the ability to obtain information, think critically, and enter into dialogue among others with different perspectives.
>
> 2. participate in their communities through membership in or contributions to organizations working to address an array of cultural, social, political, and religious interests and beliefs.
>
> 3. act politically by having the skills, knowledge, and commitment needed to accomplish public purposes, such as group problem solving, public speaking, petitioning and protesting, and voting.

[1] This is a national consensus document jointly published by CIRCLE and Pew in 2003 that has largely guided national civic education initiatives for the past five years.

> 4. have moral and civic virtues such as concern for the rights and welfare of others, social responsibility, tolerance and respect, and belief in the capacity to make a difference. (Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE 2003: 4)

Whether one agrees with the exact description of each component, I think we can generally accept the importance of civic *knowledge, skills, attitudes,* and *behaviors* tied to this ideal of citizenship. Good citizens need to be *knowledgeable* about politics, history, government, and current events; they need to be *skilled* communicators, thinkers, and deliberators; they need to be *concerned* about the common good in addition to their own self-interest, and to *believe* it is possible and worth trying to make a difference through public action; and they need to *become involved* in public or community affairs, through some combination of voting, protesting, contacting public officials, mobilizing others, contributing time or money to causes or campaigns, participating in community groups, and other appropriate actions. This is what it means to be a good citizen.[2]

On all of these measures, however, there is evidence of a profound civic achievement gap between poor and minority youth and adults, on the one hand, and white, middle-class or wealthy youth and adults, on the other:[3]

Civic knowledge and skills. As early as fourth grade and continuing into the eighth and twelfth grades, poor, African American, and Hispanic students perform significantly worse on the civics test of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) than white, Asian, and middle-class students. The same was true of American ninth graders' performance on the 1999 IEA test of civic knowledge and skills. Surveys of adult civic knowledge reveal identical patterns, with whites more informed than blacks and wealthier adults knowing more than those with lower incomes. In one 68-question survey, for example, "in no case was the percentage

[2] Researchers have confirmed the relationship among these four aspects of citizenship. See, for example, Verba et al. 1995; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Niemi and Junn 1998; Andolina et al. 2003.
[3] Note that sources for all statistics presented here without a citation can be found in Levinson 2007.

correct for blacks as high as for whites or for low-income citizens as high as that for upper-income ones" (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 157). People who are poor and non-white are also demonstrably less likely to develop civic skills via education, the workplace, or participation in voluntary associations—three of the primary venues in which individuals have the opportunity to develop and practice communication, analysis, organization, and leadership skills relevant to civic and political participation.

Civic attitudes. Attitudes of civic duty, civic identity, and efficacy—the belief that individuals can influence government—are clearly correlated both with civic and political engagement, and also with race/ethnicity and class. Civic duty has an "unmistakable" direct correlation with voting rates (Kinder 1998: 832) but is decreasingly taught to or embraced by young people, especially African Americans who historically had strong senses of civic obligation (Payne 2003). Similar concerns can be raised about reductions in civic identity. Most importantly, individuals' sense of political efficacy has been shown to increase in direct relationship to their income, with the poorest individuals expressing attitudes almost a full standard deviation lower than the wealthiest; it is also significantly correlated with race/ethnicity, with Latinos at the bottom, African Americans in the middle, and white respondents at the top. Similarly, a study specifically of young Latinos, African Americans, and whites (ages 15 to 25) shows equivalent significant differences in their confidence that "I can make a difference in solving the problems of my community."

Civic behavior/participation. In November 2004, *30 to 50 percent* more white and black citizens voted in one of the most bitterly-contested presidential elections in recent memory than did their Asian and Hispanic (of any race) citizen counterparts: 60-67 percent of black and white citizens voted, respectively, versus 44-47 percent of Asian American and Hispanic citizens.

From a socioeconomic standpoint, 80 percent of citizens with annual incomes over $75,000 voted, as opposed to 45 percent of citizens with annual incomes under $15,000. College graduates likewise voted at almost twice the rate as high school dropouts. In sheer numbers, this means that even though there are nine million more American citizens who have not graduated from high school than have earned an advanced degree, four million more highly-educated Americans than high school dropouts actually voted. Mirroring these patterns, in the 2008 "Super Tuesday" presidential primaries just a few months ago, one in four college-educated young people voted, whereas just 1 in 14 non-college-educated youth did the same (Marcelo and Kirby 2008).

These gaps in civic and political knowledge, skills, and attitudes are reflected in class and race-related disparities across many types of civic and political participation—not just the voting disparities listed above. For example, people who earn over $75,000 annually are politically active at up to *six times* the rate of people who earn under $15,000, whether measured by working for a campaign, serving on the board of an organization, contacting officials, attending public meetings, or participating in protests. Latinos are far less involved in all of these activities than whites or blacks, and blacks are more likely to participate in "outsider" activities such as protests rather than "insider" activities such as campaign donations or direct contact with officials. Hispanic young adults (ages 18-24) in particular have much lower rates of voter registration and community involvement than their white and black peers, which is of great concern since youth as a whole have been voting and participating in civic life at historically low levels—although the uptick in the November 2004 elections and the 2008 presidential primaries may forecast a reversal of this trend.

These disparities are not inevitable, as evidence from both other countries and American history demonstrate. Recent populist demonstrations and electoral involvement in Brazil and Venezuela, for example, demonstrate high levels of involvement in those countries across demographic groups. Studies of European, Canadian, and Central American democracies show an average 10-12 percentage point difference in voter turn-out between the most- and least-educated citizens—a difference far narrower than the United States' 35 percent gap (Powell Jr. 1986; Lijphart 1997: 3). In the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, immigrant incorporation groups, trade unions, fraternal organizations, and political parties regularly mobilized poor, working-class, non-white, and newly immigrant Americans, and participation in civic organizations especially was extremely widespread (Montgomery 1993; Sachar 1993: 175-6; Skocpol 1999; Skocpol et al. 2000; Montgomery 2001: 1268ff; Freeman 2002).

Hence, the figures demonstrating America's significant civic achievement gap should be humiliating for a democratic republic such as the United States. Justifications used to be given (and readily accepted) for differences in academic achievement among poor and wealthy children, and even among children of different races: a "culture of poverty," lack of parental involvement, insufficient early stimulation, lack of literacy materials in the home, non-English speaking parents, etc. As educators and as a society, we are finally moving beyond such excuses for differential academic achievement among students. We should be similarly dismissive of such excuses surrounding differential civic engagement. Democratic governance relies on the robust participation of a representative and large cross-section of citizens. Governments that appear to (and/or do) serve the interests of only a narrow segment of the population cease to be viewed as democratic, and cease to inspire the loyalty and commitment of those who feel

excluded or ignored. This poses a direct threat to both their legitimacy and stability (see, e.g., Kinder 1998). Furthermore, democratic deliberations and decisions are likely to be of lower quality if people representing only a fairly narrow range of experiences, interests, and backgrounds are involved. Part of the beauty of democracy, when it functions effectively and inclusively, is its ability to create aggregate wisdom and good judgment from individual citizens' necessarily limited knowledge, skills, and viewpoints. To exclude citizens from this process is to diminish the wisdom that the collectivity may create.

What can be done?

Educators should not be expected to resolve this problem alone (Macedo 2005), just as educators should not be held entirely responsible for the academic achievement gap, either (Rothstein 2004). But there are important ways in which educators, and especially social studies educators and allies, can help reduce the civic achievement gap.

First, we can raise awareness of the civic achievement gap as a means of reasserting the importance of the civic mission of schools. Public schools are the bulwarks of American democracy, and they should be recognized, honored, and supported as such. We are preparing *citizens* (and civically-engaged non-citizen residents), not just future workers and life-long learners, as important as those roles also are. The civic achievement gap demonstrates why public schools—and especially those that serve students who are poor or from historically disadvantaged communities—need to be given more support and resources for effective civic education in particular, and for social studies education in general.

Second, civic education must be restored to the curriculum. There is ample evidence that civic education improves civic outcomes (Damon 2001; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Galston

2001; Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE 2003; Niemi and Junn 1998; Torney-Purta 2002; Torney-Purta et al. 2001), but resources devoted to it have dropped markedly over the past thirty or forty years – especially in schools serving minority students. In the 1960s, students regularly took as many as three civics courses in high school, including civics, democracy, and government; now students tend to take only one – government – and that only in the twelfth grade (Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE 2003: 14; Niemi and Junn 1998), by which point many poor and minority students have, sadly, already dropped out (Laird et al. 2007). The national emphasis on reading, mathematics, and eventually science motivated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 threatens further to reduce the attention paid to social studies, especially in schools that serve predominantly poor students of color (Zastrow 2004; see also Diamond and Spillane 2004). If we want to narrow the civic achievement gap, civic education must begin in elementary schools and be a regular part of education K-12 (and beyond).

Third, we need to improve the civic education we do offer, particularly by providing students frequent opportunities to engage in guided experiential civic learning. These opportunities are all-too-rare in most of today's schools. Civic education at its heart must be about active participation, not passive observation. Students may serve on the school site council, governing board, or diversity committee. They may invite local community leaders to come visit the school and then interview them in small cooperative groups about their accomplishments, the challenges they face, and what motivates them to keep on working for what they believe in. After conducting a "constituent survey" of their peers, students may work together as a class to develop and implement a strategy to improve an aspect of their school. Students may debate current events and then write a letter expressing their opinions to an elected

representative or government official. They can participate in a mock trial, conduct a voter registration drive in the school parking lot or before PTA meetings, or create a webquest about a policy issue that matters to them. Research uniformly supports the efficacy of these kinds of active civic learning approaches (Amadeo et al. 2002; Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE 2003; Hahn 1998; Torney-Purta et al. 2007). Done well, guided experiential civic education can mitigate the civic achievement gap by helping students learn and apply a broad range of civic knowledge, develop a number of civic skills, embrace positive civic attitudes, and practice important civic behaviors.

Finally, we need to improve the quality of social studies and history education itself, particularly by teaching in such a way that students are enabled to construct empowering historical narratives that simultaneously cohere with their lived experiences and impel them to civic and political action. This requires an enormous shift from just teaching the history as it appears in most American history textbooks, for example, whose triumphalist narrative of inexorable American progress many students correctly judge to be incoherent, irrelevant, and/or offensive. As history and social studies teachers, we need to help our students learn and construct a history that speaks to them, that highlights the collective struggles and achievements of those in the American past in order to give guidance and inspiration to students in the present as they strive to struggle and achieve in the face of present hardships. This is a different vision of American history than most of us learned to teach, but it is arguably a more accurate one, and one that is more likely to aid students in overcoming the civic achievement gap.

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